

Nitrous Oxide Inhalation as a Fad

Dangers in Uncontrolled Sniffing for Psychedelic Effect

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"LAUGHING GAS is the newest thing for kids seeking kicks," the Stanford Daily reports. "They sniff it."

So begins a news story in the Los Angeles Times of 26 January 1967. The story continues:

"It's the latest way to travel, or so say a growing group of devotees on the campus," the university student paper said. "It can produce much the same effects as psychedelic drugs, they claim, and it's cheaper to obtain."

"One student said he buys the gas, nitrous oxide, from a medical supply house. 'They think I am anesthetizing rats,' he explained.

"Campus medical authorities said the gas, sniffed 'in sufficient amounts. . . could produce all the states of anesthesia, including the final stage—death.'"

My interest, as an anesthesiologist, a teacher and a citizen, was fetched by the foregoing news story, and was quickened further by receipt of the following letter not long afterward:

15 February 1967

Dear Doctor Dillon:

Doctor X is my personal physician, and I twisted his arm for the name of an expert to answer some questions regarding nitrous oxide—its use and abuse. You must blame Doctor X for this imposition on your time.

I suspect that the young man who has come for advice and direction is in deep trouble; he has been experimenting with nitrous oxide, on his own, without professional direction of any kind. Marital problems, business tensions, and the accidental

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availability of the gas, turned this lad to the cylinder rather than to the bottle or needle. He has been using one six-pound cylinder once a week—all in one day. Straight out of the cylinder, through a tube into his mouth, with no admixture of oxygen. He tells a very straightforward story—it raises the hair on the back of my neck!

He has great things to say for the stuff: It makes him so happy, relaxed; it increases sensory perception amazingly, etc., etc. It took him completely by surprise when I told him that its use was obviously having an additional effect that he had not mentioned: The total destruction of his faculty of making a logical judgment. He has had some nine auto accidents while under the influence—some on the freeway! With the tube in his mouth! There are Highway Patrol reports on these accidents, and not one officer paid more than a passing nod to the cylinder!

Well: I ramble—Doctor, can you send me information of any literature concerning research on this gas and its effects, the dangers involved in its use and why, although the law prohibits its "use without prescription," it can be bought without question from any supplier—and legally!

I apologize for my imposition, and beg your forbearance.

Rev. Father, Pastor

17 February 1967

Dear Father

Thank you very much for your letter of 15 February. Indeed, rather than thinking it an imposition, I am intensely interested in its contents and believe that something should be done about this problem in general, if not specifically.

You are quite correct that nitrous oxide when used for medicinal purposes requires a prescrip-

tion. On the other hand, I have investigated the problem to some limited degree and have the following comments.

Nitrous oxide is used extensively as a cream whip propellant and, as such, is sold without prescription and without any specific controls. In addition, it is sold for the reduction of preignition in racing automobile engines and this also is an uncontrolled sale. One very large manufacturer in the city told me that they had reports of a large number of thefts of small cylinders in the San Fernando area in particular, and, indeed, these cylinders were being returned to them through the police force. The manufacturer also indicated that the probabilities are that nitrous oxide could be purchased without prescription from a variety of distributor sources.

While it would appear that the control of nitrous oxide is less than satisfactory, I must say that in recent times your letter is the first indication of the promiscuous use of this agent. I am enclosing for your information a copy of a notice that appeared in a recent journal which bears on this problem, but I would have you note that the date of this was 1799 (*Science*, 155:266, 20 January 1967).

I believe that this young man is certainly risking his life very foolishly and I think that your admonition to him that he has had, at least temporarily, the total destruction of the faculty of making logical judgments was entirely correct. This arises from two possible sources: (1) From the fact that he is using nitrous oxide without supplemental oxygen and therefore possibly suffering from oxygen lack and (2) as a direct result of the effects of the nitrous oxide itself. It is theoretically possible that the effects of the oxygen lack might be cumulative, but there is no evidence that I know of that would indicate that the effects of the nitrous oxide would be cumulative. I can well believe that the story he told you raised the hair on the back of your neck. I must say that I had an immediate mental image of someone precipitating himself into infinity in a most inglorious manner.

I seriously believe that this is probably a matter that should be given some official notice and I would believe that the notification of the Highway Patrol of the potentiality of this source of accident is certainly indicated. With your permission I will notify them, although it would seem to me that since this young man cannot be involved after the fact, you certainly would have no restraints in

doing it. I would also like your permission to use the material in your letter for publication in a medical journal, obviously without the use of names, for if these cylinders are being stolen and used in the manner that they apparently are, it would indicate that hospitals and suppliers should become much more careful of their cylinder control. I believe, as I stated before, that the reason they have not in the past is because this has not been a problem to the best of my knowledge until the present time.

Again, may I thank you for bringing this extremely interesting and yet frightening matter to my attention. I trust that you will see it clear to allow me to at least use this as a matter of medical reporting and that you will find it possible, yourself, to notify the Highway Patrol and the police of the possibility of this source of accidents so that they will have their eyes open, or that you will let me do so if you feel that you should not.

I would very much like any follow-up on this that you may have, hopefully to the end that this individual will give up his practice, but, possibly, to the horrible conclusion that may result. Believe me, I sympathize with your responsibility in this matter.

Sincerely,

John B. Dillon, M.D.

27 February 1967

Dear Doctor Dillon:

Your letter of 17 February was gracious, as I knew it would be.

I am writing this day letters to the Police and Sheriff's departments and to the State Highway Patrol concerning the urgency of specific knowledge on the part of their personnel as to the meaning of the presence of a nitrous oxide cylinder in a private vehicle.

But the important thing is to get legislation to control the availability of this substance to the general public. The apparent impossibility of providing evidence of use poses a problem that you, as a scientist, would be better equipped to discuss than I. My lad tells me that a gulp of fresh air brings immediate and total recovery from the effects of direct breathing from the cylinder! His self-description may be on the subjective side; but obviously his recovery after an accident in "total black-out" was such in every case as to prevent investigating officers from questioning his ability

to operate a vehicle. Knowing how hard it is for the police to enforce narcotics laws, one wonders how they could get a conviction of using this gas, even if tough legislation were enacted.

In this letter I would ask that you send a note to the law enforcement agencies, couched in more scientific language the information might be more impressive.

I hasten to assure you that you may feel free to use the matter in these letters in any way you wish, doctor. I read your letter to the young man and he agrees that if the information can help others, it should be used.

I failed to tell you (because I thought it impertinent in a layman) that the lad in question has great hopes that his findings in the field of nitrous oxide research might lead to its beneficial use in the treatment of retarded children. He was put out to discover that I did not refer to this facet of the matter, and I made bold to tell him that I considered this reference on his part to be a subconscious device to clear his conscience of a sense of guilt upon the continued use of the chemical. Naturally he was piqued by this analysis: He did not realize that I was not questioning the sincerity of his good intention. Further, I was confident that

if there were any possibilities for the beneficial use of nitrous oxide in this direction, research people would surely have pursued the matter exhaustively.

I will close with a "mot" that would be "bon" were it not so tragic. My friend has a relative who at one time was addicted to heroin. At his suggestion she tried the nitrous oxide for purposes of comparison and insisted that its effects were far better (better?) than she had ever experienced from heroin! I asked the obvious question: Why not a massive conversion from heroin and its related narcotics to the gas? No addiction (says he), consequently no withdrawal terrors; "better" results; instant recovery when necessary (if you're not dead); not illegal to buy or sell or possess; and no danger of conviction on charges of use without prescription, since recovery is so sudden and complete, and use cannot be proven post factum. Oh, and on the whole, cheaper!

His answer was, I thought, quite valid. He thinks that such a conversion would take place were it not for fear generated in the average person by a gas cylinder!

I am very gratefully yours.

Rev. Father, Pastor

